DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 257 271 EC 172 598

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TITLE An Educational Program for Gifted and Talented Students in a Rural Setting.
PUB DATE Apr 85
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Council for Exceptional Children (63rd, Anaheim, CA, April 15-19, 1985).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Education; *Gifted; *Program Development; *Rural Education; Staff Role; *Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

A rural district designed a unique program for gifted elementary students which allowed any teacher the opportunity to develop and teach a qualitatively different unit to students identified as gifted. The half-day once-a-week pull-out program encouraged teachers to be part of the selection process and employed a coordinator to monitor the program, supervise teachers, and act as a liaison with parents. The program promoted faculty ownership and featured such units as those on creative writing and caligraphy, computer programming, art in the community, comparative religions, and kitchen chemistry. The program expanded to high school weekend seminars and evening courses for college credits. (CL)

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AN EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM FOR GIFTED AND TALENTED STUDENTS IN A RURAL SETTING

by

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The purpose of this paper is to detail a program for gifted and talented students which was developed in the Fall River Joint Unified School District, Shasta County, California. The program was begun with no state funding but with teacher and administrative approval and financial backing from the board of education. The ideas presented can be easily replicated by personnel in other school districts. The program, although developed to fit the needs of a rural school district, can be of value to all school districts, regardless of size or location.

Many factors must go into the formula for designing a program for gifted students. Student characteristics, needs, interests, motivations, capabilities and learning styles all play a part. Local community goals for education, available resources and family values need t be considered. Most of these pieces of the mosaic, which suggest a direction for our programming efforts, are continually shifting and changing -- so must our programs change in response

(Over)

Programs for the gifted do not begin with different curricula or different structures for learning, but with the different needs of each gifted learner. Regardless of the setting (rural, urban or suburban) of a program for gifted, the program is different only because the gifted learner's needs are different. Programs for gifted should:

--Provide opportunities and experiences particularly suited to the needs of the gifted learners and through which they can continue developing potential

--Establish an environment that values and enhances intelligence, talent, affective growth and intuitive ability

--Allow active and cooperative participation by the gifted to discover themselves, their powers and abilitites and to become all that they can be

--Provide opportunities for gifted students to interact with children and adults of various abilities, including the bright and talented, to be challenged to know and revere humanity for its uniqueness and connectedness

--Encourage gifted students to find their place in human evolution by discovering what abilities and in what areas they wish to contribute (Clark, 1979).

Most programs consist of resource rooms served by an itinerant teacher. This arrangement is far from ideal. Students may receive special instruction for only a brief time each week when the need may be for an appropriate program daily. The necessary travel time inevitably cuts into the instructional time (Cox and Daniel, 1983).

All gifted programs must utilize personnel in various configurations in order to function. They must operate in some administrative configuration, including elements such as facilities, a time frame and grouping procedures. All gifted programs also offer a base content regardless of the overall program configuration (Van Tassel, 1979).

In the fall of 1980, the Fall River Joint Unified School District designed a unique program. The program design allowed any teacher the opportunity to develop and teach a qualitatively different unit to students identified as gifted. In September, 1981, the district began an elementary school half-day per week, pull-out program.

Many types of giftedness have been identified by the California State Department of Education but the district chose initially to identify those children who exhibited academic giftedness. This decision was made because of the use, in each elementary school in the district, of the California Achievement Test (C.A.T.). The cost of individually administered intelligence tests was prohibitive to the developing program.

The C.A.T. scores were only one criterion used as a means to identify GATE students. Another device used to screen giftedness was the Cummings Checklist, a checklist of characteristics of gifted and talented children (Figure 1).

Teachers completed a Cummings Checklist on each student identified by C.A.T. scores. The purpose of the checklist was to give classroom teachers a list of traits and characteristics of gifted and talented children. These traits and characteristics were taken from research by scholars in the field of gifted and talented education. In giving this checklist to classroom teachers, they were being provided with descriptions of those kinds of behaviors which have been found through research to be the best indicators of gifted and talented behavior in school age children (Cummings, 1979).

Use of both checklists and tests to identify the characteristics of gifted students is supported by the literature. Group achievement test scores are not sufficient when used alone. However, by combining teacher selection with achievement testing, the efficiency of both can be improved (Clark, 1979). In addition, teachers were encouraged to provide anecdotal information which could provide any further insight

into the selection process.

It is important for teachers to be a part of the selection process. First, they have data to offer that are not available to other members of the identification team. Secondly, they need to become aware of, understand, and support the program for the gifted if it is to succeed.

Before the half-day, once-a-week, pull-out GATE program began, the principal of each school in the district selected a classroom teacher as Coordinator of the GATE program. The first duty of the Coordinator was to review students' C.A.T. scores and request that teachers submit completed Cummings Checklists on each student who had scored at or above the 96th percentile in at least two total areas (reading, mathematics, or language).

The Coordinator was also responsible for planning and implementing differentiated curricula. The first unit taught to identified GATE students was one designed by the Coordinator to provide the students with a four week introductory unit on giftedness. The yearly orientation meetings were (and continue to be) very important to the overall success of the program. Although students were familiar with each other before they were placed in the GATE program, they had not all been in the same regular classroom. Activities designed by the Coordinator included discussions centering around what it does and does not mean to be identified as gifted, how to answer peer questions about the program, self-discovery surveys, and exercises designed to bring the class together as a group.

In addition to the other duties, the Coordinator maintained records on each identified GATE student and communicated regularly to parents

and the principal. The student information included:

1. The consent letter, signed by parents
2. Student interest inventories completed during the orientation unit
3. Copies of the evaluations completed at the end of each unit by teacher-specialists.

The Coordinator presided over all meetings with parents. These evening meetings, or "GATE Showcases", gave parents and members of the community the opportunity to receive information about the program; to see the Coordinator as an advocate of education for the gifted; and to view student projects produced in the GATE program. Communications with the principal included a schedule of the units and memoranda and personal conversations.

One of the most important roles of the Coordinator was to encourage and assist classroom teachers in the design and the preparation of qualitatively different courses to students in the GATE program (Diezsi, 1984).

It has been stated that teachers of gifted students possess traits which all teachers possess. It is the degree to which these traits are exercised that differentiates most teachers (Fischer, 1983).

The behaviors of supportive classroom teachers as described by teachers of gifted included:

1. Provides an enriched classroom environment
2. Provides differentiated instruction
3. Involves students in independent investigations
4. Teaches the process skills
5. Does not require make-up of work missed during pull-out project involvement
6. Works cooperatively with gifted consultant
7. Provides options/choices to accommodate learning styles
8. Is knowledgeable about gifted child and appropriate approaches (Wyatt, 1982).

The regular classroom teacher's attitude and skill make a difference in the success of educational programs for the gifted. Classroom teachers' cooperation is essential in identifying gifted/talented students, initiating programs at the local level, cooperating with resource consultants, attending inservice opportunities and, above all, designing and implementing instruction for gifted and talented students (Witters and Vasa, 1981).

Every teacher in the district had the opportunity to design and teach a unit of study to the students in the GATE class. Sally Reis (1983) states:

> Another way to promote faculty ownership in the gifted program is the active recruitment of classroom teachers from various grade levels throughout the school district for the purpose of sharing and exchanging talents under the auspices of the gifted program.

The teacher desiring to teach a unit submitted a written curriculum proposal to the Coordinator for approval. The unit, as designed, needed to address the unique needs, learning styles, cognitive styles, and motivational characteristics of gifted children. If the unit were deficient in any area, the Coordinator worked with the teacher to rewrite the proposal. The Coordinator then scheduled those units as well as those accepted as submitted.

The written proposal also included a review of the goals, specific objectives, materials and resources needed, length of the unit in weeks, budget, and evaluation criteria (Figure 2).

When a classroom teacher had been approved to present a self-designed unit and was identified as a teacher-specialist, the GATE program provided a stipend to the teacher for outside-of-class planning and preparation time as stated in the proposal. The GATE program also

paid for a substitute teacher for the teacher-specialist's classroom while the unit was being taught.

Teacher-specialists were expected to attend two evening meetings with parents. At the meeting held before the unit began, the teacher-specialist explained the course, distributed a written unit outline to parents, and answered questions. The teacher-specialist whose unit had just been completed, and the students who had taken part in the course, were also at the parent meeting to present a culminating activity which showcased the unit.

Following each unit the teacher-specialist completed an individual student performance evaluation. The original evaluation was sent to the child's parents and a copy was placed in the student's file.

Teachers received information about the program at regularly scheduled teachers' meetings and were encouraged to provide input about students and the program. They were all invited to attend the GATE Identification Committee Meetings.

The Identification Committee was (and is) the decision-making body for the GATE program. Members of this committee included the principal, the Director of Curriculum, GATE Coordinator, and all those classroom teachers who had pupils under consideration for identification. The committee met after school and, although attendance by regular classroom teachers was not mandatory, it was encouraged.

Names of students considered for the GATE program were submitted to the committee. The committee members reviewed the students' records, grade point average, C.A.T. scores, Cummings Checklist, classroom performance, and teacher recommendation.

A recommendation concerning each student was made. If a student was not recommended for placement, one of two avenues was taken. Either a student was removed from consideration or his/her name was placed on a "watch list." When a student's name was placed on a watch list, the classroom teacher was asked to collect more data on the child and possibly re-submit his/her name to the committee. If a student was not recommended for placement in the GATE program, parents were notified by letter (Figure 3).

Every placement in the program was contingent upon student performance. If student evalutions from teacher-specialists indicated that the student was not progressing satisfactorily, the committee recommended that the child be removed from the program. When this decision was made, the Coordinator met with and counseled both the parents and child. The Coordinator stressed that the student and parents had not failed, rather the program, as designed, was not currently meeting the student's needs. The student might be considered the following year for re-inclusion in the program.

Units taught to elementary GATE students have included Ancient Greece and Rome, Creative Writing and Calligraphy, Computer Programming, Creative Problem Solving, Drama and History of the Theater, Art in the Commmunity (taught by the high school art teacher in cooperation with three local artists), Kitchen Chemistry (taught at the high school by the home economics teacher), Comparative Religions -- Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism (designed and taught by an elementary school special education teacher who spent the summer of 1983 traveling in Europe and Asia), Logic, Japan, Biology, Weather, Geology, Energy, and Spanish.

The program continues at the high school level with weekend seminars in such areas as Rocketry, Photography, Lasers, Textiles, Computer Programming, and the Fine and Dramatic Arts. In addition to the seminars, eleventh and twelfth grade GATE students have enrolled in and received college credit for junior college courses taught in the evenings on one of the high school campuses. These courses have included such diverse subjects as Watercolor, Public Speaking, Economics, History of Mexico, U.S. History and Government, and German.

This GATE program, by tapping the individual strengths and interests of all interested teachers, has truly created and encouraged teacher ownership and involvement.

Characteristics of Gifted and Talented Students ©

The following list of characteristics, while by no means all inclusive, represents traits found in gifted and creative children. If any student in your class is described by at least twelve (12) of the items on this list, you may want to watch him/her more carefully for possible inclusion in the gifted program. Those items which are most applicable should be double checked. Any supporting information and comments should be written on the back of this form.

____ 1. Is an avid reader.
____ 2. Has received an award in science, art, literature.
____ 3. Has avid interest in science or literature.
____ 4. Very alert, rapid answers.
____ 5. Is outstanding in math.
____ 6. Has a wide range of interests.
____ 7. Is very secure emotionally.
____ 8. Is venturesome, anxious to do new things.
____ 9. Tends to dominate peers or situations.
____ 10. Readily makes money on various projects or activities — is an entrepreneur.
____ 11. Individualistic — likes to work by self.
____ 12. Is sensitive to feelings of others — or to situations.
____ 13. Has confidence in self.
____ 14. Needs little outside control — disciplines self.
____ 15. Adept at visual art expression.
____ 16. Resourceful — can solve problems by ingenious methods.
____ 17. Creative in thoughts, new ideas, seeing associations, innovations, etc. (not artistically).
____ 18. Body or facial gestures very expressive.
____ 19. Impatient — quick to anger or anxious to complete a task.
____ 20. Great desire to excel even to the point of cheating.
____ 21. Colorful verbal expressions.
____ 22. Tells very imaginative stories.
____ 23. Frequently interrupts others when they are talking.
____ 24. Frank in appraisal of adults.
____ 25. Has mature sense of humor (puns, associations, etc.)
____ 26. Is inquisitive.
____ 27. Takes a close look at things.
____ 28. Is eager to tell others about discoveries.
____ 29. Can show relationships among apparently unrelated ideas.
____ 30. Shows excitement in voice about discoveries.
____ 31. Has a tendency to lose awareness of time.

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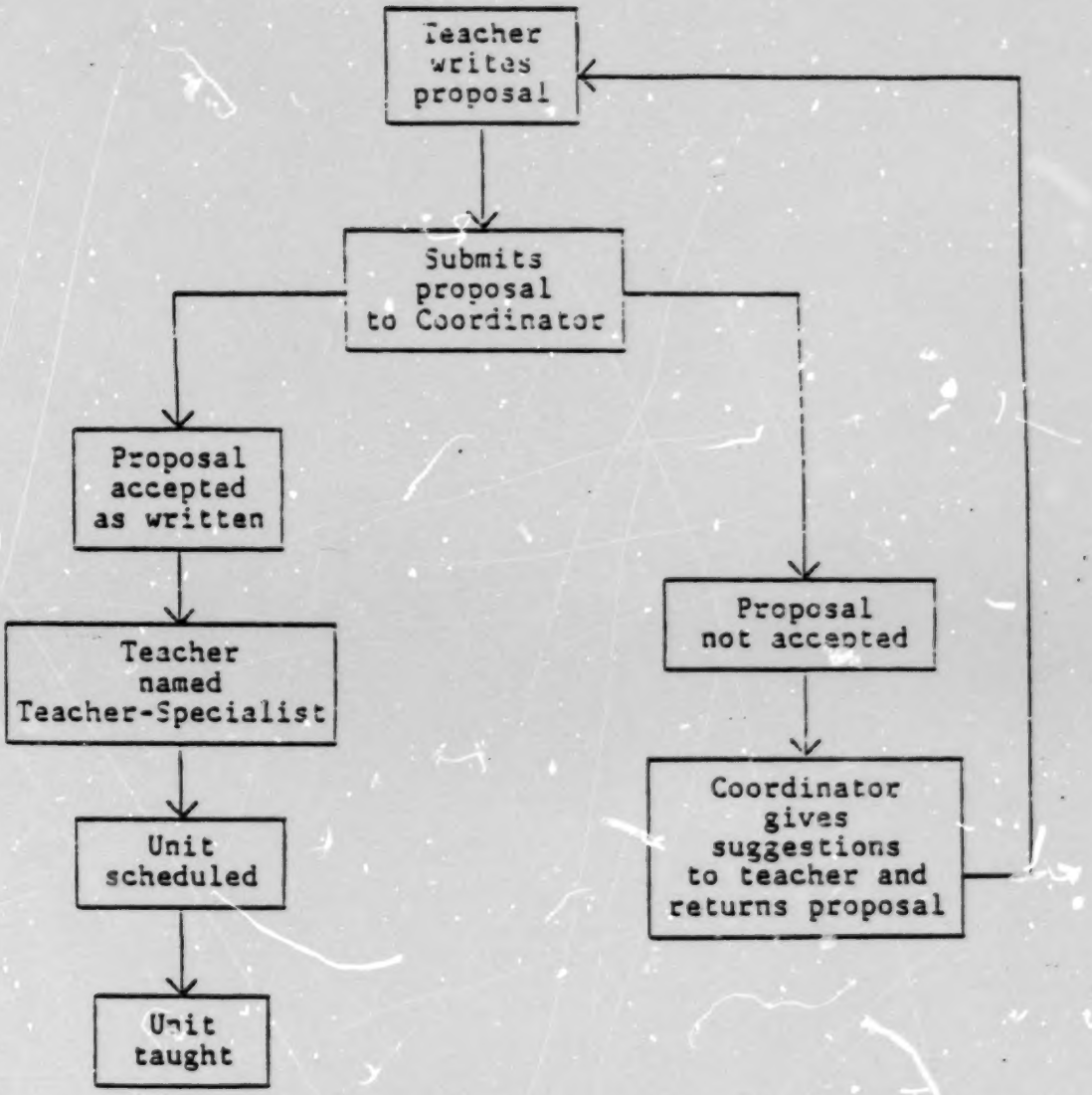

Figure 2

The Teacher-Specialist

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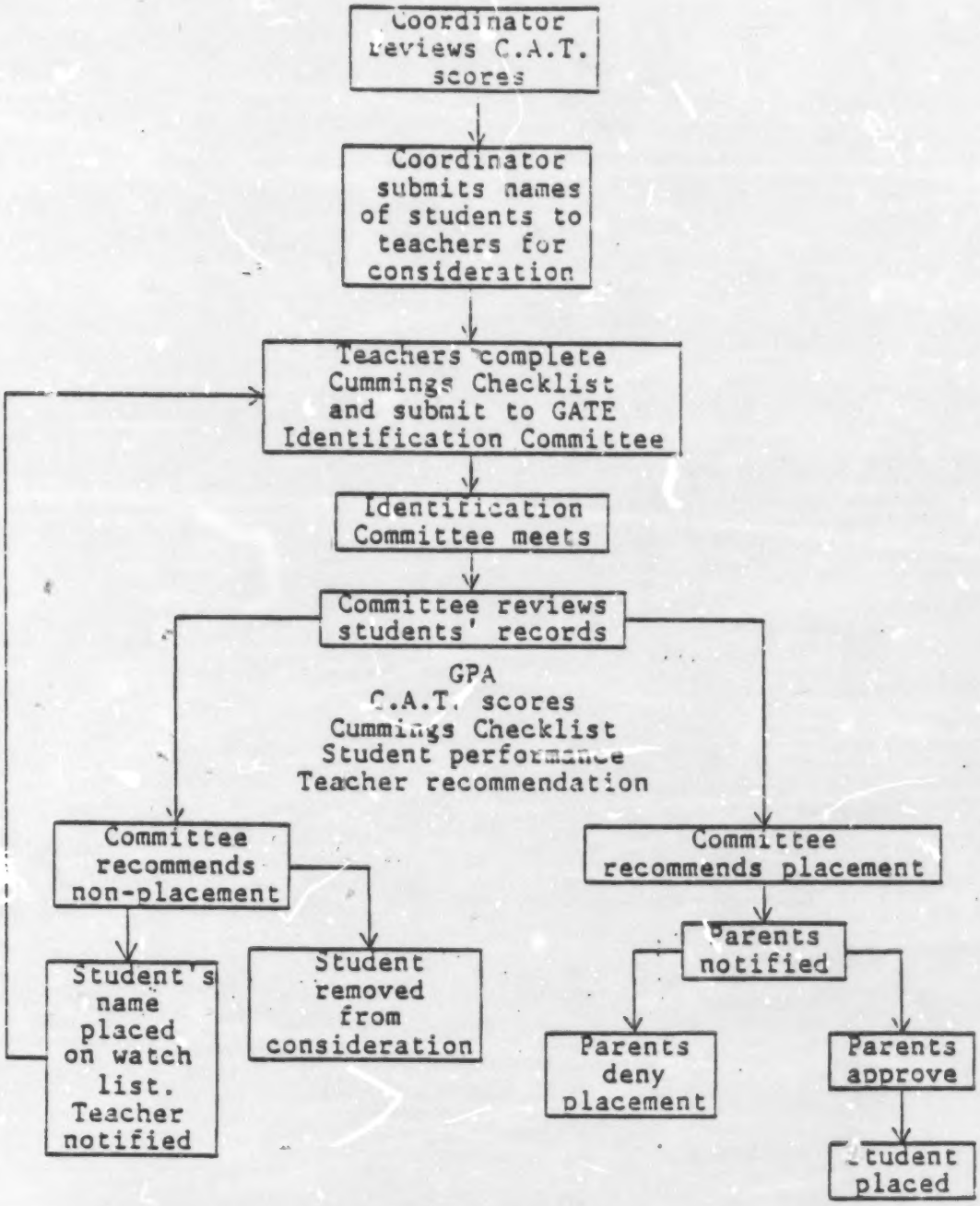

Figure 3

The GATE Identification Committee

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Paper presented at the Annual Convention
of the
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